DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 190 SP 037 761

AUTHOR Collier, Sunya T.
TITLE Theories of Learning: Reflective Thought in Teacher Education.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Memphis, TN, November 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; *Preservice Teacher Education; *Reflective Teaching; Student Teacher Attitudes; Student Teachers; Teaching Methods; Thinking Skills
IDENTIFIERS Preservice Teachers; *Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

To help educators better understand how to prepare reflective teachers, this study examined four preservice elementary teachers' theories regarding how elementary children learn and what instruction should look like. Participants designed and implemented learning activities for elementary students. Each activity was videotaped, observed, and critiqued through individual interviews. While discussing the videotape, participants assessed their views about the value of the learning activity and their interpretations of what had occurred and why. Data collection involved individual interviews, focus group discussions, and written reflections. Results showed that all participants' reflections on how children learn indicated an awareness that understanding is the true indicator of learning, children's natural theory-making should be appreciated in elementary classrooms, and understanding will occur more often through experiential learning. Responses regarding appropriate instructional choices revealed that student understanding may not be indicated by high test scores, so alternative assessment is desirable; instructional focus should emphasize helping students discover their own natural ways of learning; and instructional strategies should let students actively see and experience things through group and individual projects, play acting, and roundtable discussions. Implications for preservice education include incorporating social reflection into coursework and field placements, providing caring environments, encouraging dialogue and debate, promoting guided reflection via videotaped interactions, helping teachers examine prior beliefs, and encouraging development of theory by analyzing personal practice. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 416 190

THEORIES OF LEARNING: REFLECTIVE THOUGHT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Sunya T. Collier
Georgia State University

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

S Collier

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Paper presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association Conference
November, 1997, Memphis, TN

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

If the aim of teacher education is the development of reflective, creative, responsible thought (Archambault, 1964, p. xviii), then teacher educators owe it to themselves, their students, and the future of the teaching profession to explore viable avenues for facilitating the construction of practical wisdom. One way in which teacher educators can advance this aim is to encourage preservice teachers to cultivate and articulate their own thoughts on the content of their learning (Hollingsworth, 1989; Holt-Reynolds, 1992).

Reflection is widely considered an important, if not primary, means through which preservice teachers can become more effective decision makers. Much of the application of reflection in teacher education programs, however, is based on preservice teachers' opportunities to learn about the "practice" of teaching, often to the exclusion of how those practices are informed by what is known about how children learn (Calderhead, 1987; Cruickshank, 1987; Pultorak, 1996; Ross, 1989, 1990). Therefore, the emphasis is often on what teachers do and how they do it (Shulman, 1986, 1987; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1991).

The study excerpted in this article was designed to help educators better understand how to prepare more thoughtful and reflective teachers. Reflection became the process through which student practitioners could consider seriously the question "why are we doing what we do." The primary research question was, What are elementary preservice teachers' theories regarding how elementary children learn, and, therefore, what should instruction look like in their future classrooms? Through examination of personal theories of learning and the impact they may have on instructional choice, it was hoped that student practitioners would actively engage in and come to value the process of reflection.

By voicing and justifying their thoughts within a group of inquirers, participants attempted to make personal understandings explicit and defensible. Reflection included learning to take

responsibility for their understanding and making a conscious effort to construct theories through interaction with their experiences. As Dewey noted, there is no reason to suggest that experience is exclusively private or subjective; rather, every experience is an interaction (Dewey, 1939). In this sense, reflection is a social arena for the public exchange and examination of ideas. The process of inquiry reinforces the development of personal understanding.

Participants and Methods

The four participants in this study represented a purposeful sample of education majors who had experience with reflective activities in previous undergraduate education courses. All reported having completed reflective journals, projects, and/or papers in content area classes one semester before the commencement of the study. None, however, had been given the opportunity to reflect on their own presuppositions about learning, much less relate this knowledge to decisions regarding instructional choice.

As part of the study, the participants designed and implemented learning activities for elementary children in grades one through five. Each learning activity was videotaped and then observed and critiqued through the process of an individual interview. As soon as possible after the learning activity was completed, an individual interview was held with the participant to facilitate her reflection on the experience. The videotape in this case was used as an instrument of reflection. During dialogue about the videotaped experience, participants assessed their views about the value of the learning activity, their interpretations of what had taken place and why. In each instance, participants chose to redesign the original activity and reimplement it for a second, third, or even fourth opportunity to gain insight into children's ways of thinking. Each time, the videotaped recording of the events was discussed and critiqued during an interview as a means of revising and refining participant understanding.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Data Sources

Over a period of eight weeks, participants dialogued in multiple settings. As a means of providing a variety of reflective opportunities, participant thoughts were collected through three data sources: (a) individual interviews, (b) focus group discussions, and (c) written reflections. Individual interviews took place as needed throughout the field placement and focus group interviews were held once every week for the final five weeks of the field placement. Four focus group sessions took place prior to the field placement as a means of focusing on course content (e.g., theories of learning) in relationship to participants' views about how children learn.

The purpose of the focus group interviews was to provide a supportive setting where, at least potentially, individual beliefs could be voiced and examined through social exchange. Each week, one videotaped learning activity was randomly selected to become a focal point of discussion. Together, the preservice teachers shared, compared, analyzed, constructed, and concluded what their understandings were about how children learn and how instructional decisions must reflect that knowledge. The individual interviews offered occasions to discuss expectations, surprises and insights. I kept a research journal as a means of recording, assessing, and pondering emerging themes as they arose out of individual and/or group discourse.

Results

On the basis of my data, I developed individual case studies to capture the reflective voice of each participant. A combination of biographical and reflective vignettes included descriptions of their personal background as learners, their learning activity designs, and their personal metaphors for learning and teaching. Ongoing analysis of individual interviews, focus group interviews, individual written reflections, and my reflective journal revealed three interrelated yet discrete themes relative to the primary research question, What are elementary preservice

teachers' theories regarding how elementary children learn and, therefore, what should instruction look like in their future classrooms? All participants' reflections on how children learn indicated an awareness (a) that understanding is the true indicator of learning, (b) that children's natural theory-making should be appreciated in elementary school classrooms, and (c) that understanding is more likely to occur when children are encouraged to participate actively, both mentally and physically, in experiential learning opportunities. Participant responses regarding appropriate instructional choice revealed that (a) student understanding may not be indicated by high test scores and therefore, alternative (non-traditional, teacher-directed) pedagogy and assessments were desirable, (b) instructional focus should be geared towards helping students discover their own natural ways of knowing and, then, developing them to a more refined level, and (c) instructional strategies should include letting students actively "see and experience things for themselves" through "individual and group projects, play-acting, and round-table discussions."

Implications for Teacher Education

Some implications of these findings for teacher education are as follows:

1. Incorporate opportunities for social reflection in coursework and field placements.

2. Provide a caring environment where preservice teachers feel "safe" enough to articulate their thoughts about teaching and learning.

3. Construct an instructional approach where dialogue and debate are encouraged.

4. Provide opportunities for guided reflection using videotape of interactions with elementary students.

5. Acknowledge the importance of preservice teachers' understandings of their own prior beliefs and incipient theories before attempting to challenge them.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

6. Design field placement opportunities that encourage development of theory through analysis of personal practice.

By engaging in reflective activities, preservice teachers in this study began to analyze their own conceptions of how children come to understand. This in turn informed how they were viewing their role in the elementary child's learning process. Participants directly confronted evidence that helped them acknowledge, confirm, and even challenge their intuitive theories about how young children come to know. This research suggests that as teacher educators provide opportunities for preservice teachers to construct theory through the analysis of practice and, envision the idea of reflection as a process of community problem solving, it may be more likely that student practitioners become more habitual in their attempts to develop defensible platforms for future instructional choices.

REFERENCES

Archambault, R. D. (Ed.). (1964). John Dewey on education: Selected writings. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Calderhead, J. (1987). Cognition and metacognition in teachers' professional development. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Washington, D. C.

Cruickshank, D. R. (1987). Reflective teaching: The preparation of students of teaching. Reston, VA: Association of Teacher Educators.

Hollingsworth, S. (1989). Prior beliefs and cognitive change in learning to teach. American Educational Research Journal, 26(2), 160-189.

Holt-Reynolds, D. (1992). Personal history-based beliefs as relevant prior knowledge in course work. American Educational Research Journal, 29(2), 325-249.

Pultorak, E. G. (1996). Facilitating reflective thought in novice teachers. Journal of Teacher Education, 44(4), 288-295.

Ross, D. D. (1989). First steps in developing a reflective approach. Journal of Teacher Education, 40(2), 22-30.

Ross, D. D. (1990). Programmatic structures for the preparation of reflective teachers. In R. T. Clift, R. W. Houston, & M. C. Pugach (Eds.), Encouraging reflective practice in education: An analysis of issues and programs (pp. 97-118). New York: Teachers College Press.

Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. Educational Researcher, 15(2), 4-14.

Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. Harvard Educational Review, 57(1), 1-22.

Zeichner, K. M. & Tabachnick, B. R. (1991). Reflections on reflective teaching. In B. R. Tabachnick & K. M. Zeichner (Eds.), Issues and practices in inquiry-oriented teacher education (pp. 1-21). London: Falmer Press.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE